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Lucia A Keegan 11/08/2006 02:47:15 PM From DB/Inbox: Lucia A Keegan

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UNCLAS SENSITIVE PARIS 07126

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RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 2514
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 007126

SIPDIS

FROM USMISSION UNESCO PARIS

SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: MIDDLE EAST ISSUES AT UNESCO'S 175th EXECUTIVE BOARD (FALL 2006) WRAP UP

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY With the military conflict between Israel and Lebanon still very much on the minds of delegates, the UNESCO Executive Board was set to face the always sensitive issues of Jerusalem and the Occupied Territories. This time, with the scars of war still open and emotions running high, a resolution calling for UNESCO involvement in Lebanese reconstruction was added to the mix.
END SUMMARY

¶2. (SBU) From the opening days of the conflict and before the Board meeting began, signals were being sent throughout UNESCO that it was going to be difficult to reach consensus on a decision, and that the unwritten rule of keeping the organization from becoming overtly politicized was in danger. In early August, with hostilities still going on, the Palestinian observer delegation had organized an emotional press conference with UNESCO Artist for Peace Marcel Khalife. This left no doubt that anti-Israeli feelings were running high at UNESCO. Another program, organized by the Arab Group, entitled, "Jerusalem, Etat des Lieux", was a daylong seminar focused on the plight of the Palestinians in Jerusalem who, according to the speakers, are increasingly besieged under current Israeli policies. At the same time, UNESCO's emergency evaluation team sent to assess damage to World Heritage sites in Lebanon after the cease-fire was, by contrast, a serious effort by the Secretariat to keep the dialogue balanced and controlled.

¶3. (SBU) In recent years, Israel has been successfully using UNESCO as a vehicle to engage as an active player within the international community. Israel had even won a close race for a seat on the prestigious World Heritage Committee. However, given the three problematic resolutions regarding the Middle East, at this fall's

Executive Board, Israel's main goal was to set some firm lines on its willingness to compromise on basic issues of interest to it. Israel was particularly upset by the anti-Israeli tone of the Lebanese resolution, given its previous willingness to compromise on the resolutions on Jerusalem and the Occupied Territories. The Israeli delegation fought the Lebanese document and clearly stated that if it were adopted, even with negotiated text without overt anti-Israeli language, the result might be an unavoidable rift with UNESCO after so many years of positive efforts. Behind the scenes, in the side meeting rooms and hallways of UNESCO, a small number of delegations, including the US, and the Finnish Ambassador, in his role as EU president, worked tirelessly to attempt to neutralize the most contentious language in the three draft resolutions on the Middle East that were to be brought before the Board on the theory that since a resolution would definitely be adopted, it should be as neutral as possible.

¶4. (SBU) In connection with Jerusalem, Palestinian efforts to expand the scope of the resolution, to add a "social" element, with reference to a "living heritage", to the problems within UNESCO's mandate were blocked successfully. The Jerusalem decision remained unchanged from the decision adopted by consensus during April's 174th Executive Board. The resolution regarding the Occupied Territories, despite attempts to dramatically change it to more fully reflect the deterioration of the situation of the Palestinian peoples in the Occupied Territories, went forward with only minor changes from the version adopted at recent Board meetings. Both resolutions, reviewed and adopted by the PX (Programme and External Relations Commission), were finally sent to the Executive Board and adopted without debate. (Note: The US always made it clear that we would never support the resolution, however, what was at stake was whether enough anti-Israeli language could be removed so that we wouldn't be forced to call for a vote.)

¶5. (SBU) The much anticipated resolution on Lebanon was crafted in Beirut. Lebanon's Minister of Culture Tarek Mitri made a special trip to Paris to make a statement during the Board meeting regarding the situation in Lebanon and to explain why the draft decision was so important to them. The part of his presentation that used tough language to condemn Israel was in Arabic. The succeeding parts in French and English were much more conciliatory and more balanced than the explanatory note which prefaced the draft decision. Ambassador Oliver held a 45-minute private meeting with Minister Mitri regarding the need for a document that was as non-accusatory as possible towards Israel so that it could attract support from UNESCO member states.

¶6. (SBU) After two weeks of intense negotiations and last minute consultations with high-level decision makers in multiple capitals, the text was re-worked to eliminate any explicit references to Israel, and the language was toned down. However, it was clear from early on that the Israelis would not be able to accept the draft decision under any circumstances because of the implicit criticism of Israel.

¶7. (SBU) The issue went down to the wire, with a negotiated text introduced at a short PX Commission meeting on Wednesday, October 11th by the PX Chairman. There was no discussion on the document, but it was formally tabled to enable countries to send back an official version to their capitals. Many delegations were angered at the fact that the draft decision had not been properly translated, and indicated that they would have to consult with their capitals before indicating whether the language was acceptable or not. Since the draft decision was still unacceptable to many countries, including the US and Canada, negotiations continued. The PX Commission was postponed two more times because of a lack of agreement on several key aspects of the document.

¶8. (SBU) The PX Commission opened the day on Friday, October 13th, before the Plenary, in order to discuss the document that had been revised during the last minute negotiations. The PX Chairman introduced the new language and the revised draft decision was adopted by the Commission with no debate. However, the PX Chairman said before the adoption that he was aware that there were countries that could not support the draft decision.

¶9. (SBU) After the decision was adopted by the Plenary that afternoon, the US and Canada formally disassociated themselves from

the decision with statements to that effect, which will be put into the permanent record. Portugal intervened on behalf of EU members to express the EU's satisfaction with the resolution. Cameroon spoke on behalf of the Africa Group, also expressing their satisfaction with the resolution.

¶10. (SBU) The Israeli Ambassador, David Kornbluth, obliged to leave before sunset in observance of the Jewish Sabbath, gave his number two, Daniel Safran, the responsibility of reading Israel's declaration (in its status as Observer at the Executive Board) strongly opposing the decision. (Executive Board document references Jerusalem 175 EX/15; Palestine 175 EX/44 and Add; Lebanon 175/EX/PX/DR.6).

¶11. (SBU) Comment: It was a close call but UNESCO managed to avoid the overt politicization of the Human Rights Council and that characterized so much of UNESCO's work in the years before the US left the organization. The US statement, though supporting the idea of UNESCO's providing assistance to Lebanon in its fields of competence, strongly criticized the anti-Israeli political tone of the document. What remains to be seen is how Israel will respond to the Executive Board's decision. End comment.

OLIVER